

Jack Snyder, Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 1-111, 235-322.

George W. Bush length summary:

Puzzle: Why do states engage in “counterproductive aggressive policy?”

Answer: Problem has an ideational source, the MYTH that a state’s security can only be safeguarded through expansion.

A more *specific* summary:

Variation in the time and speed of industrialization will lead to variation in the distribution of interests of elites, the political structure of the government, and the government’s capacity for strategic learning. (p. 58) These are the three steps on Snyder’s causal pathway towards imperial overextension.

Early industrializers (UK, USA) will be characterized by diffuse elite interests and democratic state structures. Late industrializers (Germany, Japan) will be characterized by immobile, concentrated, and parochial elite interests, and cartelized politics. Late, late industrializers will be characterized by a hypercentralized political and economic system, a unitary governmental elite with encompassing interests.

Narrowly interested groups logroll coalition votes and use propaganda to justify policy to the public. Statesmen sometimes play a role in reconciling these groups but are then constrained since their power is dependent upon those groups or they come to believe the strategic myths they are using through a process called “blowback.”

Strategic myths are justifications of aggressive policy made by domestic political coalitions with parochial interests in expansion, military growth or autarky.

Cartelized political systems will be most prone to myth-making, while democracies will be less prone due to their more diffuse interests and better strategic learning. Myth-making and overexpansion is harder to predict in unitary political systems where the dictator’s own beliefs about the myths are more causally important.

Different Types of Strategic Myths:

1. Domino theory: losses on the periphery will lead to a collapse in the core.
2. Offensive advantage: 1st striker has advantage, gains available thru aggression.
3. Paper tigers: opponents are threatening, but will meekly comply if threatened.

STRATEGIES INSPIRED BY STRATEGIC MYTHS ARE COUNTERPRODUCTIVE. Because they lead to **SELF-ENCIRCLEMENT** (the attraction of a balancing coalition) And to **IMPERIAL OVEREXTENSION** (quagmires where expansion’s costs begin to outweigh its benefits).

When the degree to which the government is controlled by coordinated, narrow interests is low, then **STRATEGIC LEARNING** is more likely. Democracies and unitary dictatorships are more likely to retrench and appease.

Why do Myths become counterproductive?

In Cartelized systems, domestic interest groups with concentrated interests logroll policies, either by pursuing multiple imperialist projects (each supported by a different group) or by trying to pursue incompatible goals (such as imperial and anti-imperial tactics). These policies persist, despite their counterproductive nature, because of collective action problems (each interest seeks its own welfare, confounding coordination), the meddling of coalition managers eager to remain in power, the threat of angering an ideologically motivated public (a by-product of propaganda and myth-making), propaganda blowback, or the leaders have short time horizons.

In democratic systems, diffuse interests thwarts cartelization, competition for median voters moderates policy. Myths can still persist when the public lacks information, when representation anomalies lead to legislative cartels, concentrated voters have interests in particular expansion projects, or when multi-dimensional issue cleavages lead to cartelization.

In unitary political systems, leaders have no parochial interests. But sometimes they do have ties to particular blocks, or they sometimes believe in strategic myths inspired through blowback.

Testing. Snyder tests his theory against Realist and Cognitive explanations in five case studies: Germany, Japan, UK, USSR, and USA.

Realists say overexpansion more likely when power is additive, or when relative power shifts, or when military technology favors attackers, or when states fail to align against attackers.

Cognitive hypotheses on overexpansion focus on mental scripts developed in foreign policy “formative lessons” where salient failures or successes suggest how to proceed.

Cases: (My opinion) Germany is Snyder’s best case, where late industrialization consolidated power within a narrow base of heavy industries. In the marriage of “iron and rye,” agricultural, atavistic Junkers aligned with industrialists and military leaders to hijack the state. Logrolling led to grain tariffs (angering Russia) and military and naval expenditures (angering Russia, France and UK). Leaders generated strategic myths like the offense had the advantage and that the UK was a paper tiger to justify their activities.

In the USSR, coalition managers like Khrushchev and Brezhnev satisfied three factions in Soviet society, by augmenting the Soviet military, aiding Communist change outside the USSR, and by attempting to relax tensions with the West.

In the USA, the Cold War Consensus grew out of political struggles between Republicans and Democrats over which party was strongest in resisting Communism. A Europe first strategy was melded with an Asia first strategy, meaning that the USA would resist growth in Communism all over the globe.